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ABSTRACT

This review of the literature was undertaken by the author with the hope that he would garner some knowledge which would be practically useful in using group work with underachieving junior college students. Of the studies reviewed, two seemed to offer ideas which could be of direct, functional benefit. One of these was a report of research which was unique in that it placed emphasis on the prevention of underachievement rather than its cure. The other report indicated that upperclassmen trained in group work would perhaps be the best qualified academic counselors available. However, it was the opinion of the author that taken in aggregate the research on group work with underachievers represents a fragmented, contradictory, incoherent hodgepodge of inconclusive data. The author of one of the reviewed articles indicated that the lack of uniformity in the identification of "underachievers" causes the confusion in related research. He suggested that more exacting criteria for selection of the population to be studied must be established. (Author/BW)

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THE GROUP PROCESS AS AN AID TO ACADEMIC UNDERACHIEVERS—A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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A Report

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INTRODUCTION

Academic underachievement is one of the primary problems of education. Baymur and Patterson summarized this problem when they stated:

> Academic failure is one of the major problems confronting counselors in schools and colleges. Not all failures are a result of lack of academic ability or aptitude. Mental or intellectual ability is not the exclusive determinant of academic achievement. The discrepancy between potential and achievement identifies a group of students who are known as underachievers. Underachievement is both a problem to the individual, who may suffer from the sense of failure, and to society which loses the full potential contributions of unestimated numbers of its members.
>
> It follows that anything which can be done to reduce the incidence of underachievement will contribute to individual and social accomplishment and well-being (1, p. 83).

The literature indicates that academic underachievement concerns not only educators but students as well. Using interviews, Hunter and Morgan investigated the problems of 200 men and women at Colorado Agricultural and Mechanical College. They reported the following results:

> In order of decreasing frequency of mention, the following problems were reported by one-fifth or more of the students: budgeting study time, studying effectively, planning extra-curricular activities not to interfere with academic school life, concentrating during study hours, . . . (2, p. 90).

Additional evidence of student concern is indicated by the following statement from Guidance in Groups:

> Studies of the problems of individuals at various age levels have shown that the educational program does not always give adequate emphasis to the development of power in learning to learn. In surveys both at the high school and college levels, students invariably list aspects of how to study among their major problems or worries. At all levels, counselors or psychologists have discovered learning difficulties among the causes of maladjustment for many individuals who require special assistance. The

> psychiatrist at Yale University reported that one half of the freshmen with whom he had consulted were emotionally concerned over scholastic difficulties and that the majority of these students had never learned to study systematically. Similar findings are reported widely in the literature dealing with student needs and problems (3, p. 149).

It is evident that academic underachievement presents a perplexing problem to educators, students, and indeed to our entire society. What, then, can be done in order to alleviate or minimize this problem?

The literature on the topic places emphasis on the social and emotional nature of underachievement and implies that the group process represents one of the most promising approaches. In 1964 Mink stated:

> One of the significant factors in underachievement might well be the influence of significant others, e.g., parents, peers and teachers, in the underachiever's environment. Failure of an investigator to describe and analyze the contemporary behavior of the subjects in interaction with their environment might lead to an incomplete picture of the variables influencing underachievement (4, p. 31).

Caplan stressed the social nature of adolescent problems when he wrote,"As group counseling is thought to be a real social situation, it seems particularly appropriate for work with adolescents, many of whose problems are social in nature (5, p. 124)." However, this study produced inconclusive results as to the effects of group counseling on academic achievement. Caplan concluded, "Certain changes in academic records also occurred although the findings were not clear-cut (5, p. 127-28)."

The relationship between emotional problems and academic achievement was indicated by Spielberger, Weitz, and Denny:

> There is little evidence that emotional problems are the immediate causes of poor academic performance. But for many students, emotional problems predispose them to develop maladaptive study habits and poor attitudes toward academic work which, in turn, lead to underachievement (6, p. 195).

The authors also quote previous studies which suggest that emotional adjustment can be facilitated through group counseling. The implication here was that academic underachievement is related to emotional problems and that emotional problems can be helped through group counseling (6, p. 196).

Perhaps the best summary of the merits of group counseling with underachieving adolescents was provided by Cohn and Sniffen in their study of eight underachieving seventh grade boys:

> In addition to the fact that group counseling involves fewer students than group guidance, it has more rigid requirements for success. For example, Lifton indicates that group counseling has its major emphasis on providing group members with opportunities to explore their own feelings and attitudes. It requires that the members experience some anxiety about a problem which they wish to resolve and that they possess the willingness to share their concerns. Group counseling implies a permissive atmosphere where an individual can explore his negative feelings or ideas without fear of losing status within the group and where the potential authority figure conveys a feeling of real concern and acceptance. For the students this process offers an opportunity: (a) to express themselves both verbally and actively on any number of topics without the usual limitations set by school or society; (b) to test reality by trying out new methods of handling situations without fear of punishment from authority figures; (c) to help others and discuss common feelings without losing their individual identity; and (d) to investigate and evaluate their past experiences in light of their present behavior so that they can make the decision for change in a more positive direction (7, p. 133).

Now that we have made the case for group counseling with underachievers, let us explore some of the related research.

SELECTED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"Appropriate and Inappropriate Group Counseling with Academic Underachievers" (8 & 9)

Gilbreath conducted two related studies. In the first, conducted in 1967, he investigated the effects of two different methods of group counseling on the college male underachiever. He found that male underachievers who have strong dependent needs are more likely to improve in GPA if they participate in a high-authority, leader-structured method of group counseling and conversely that underachieving men who are more autonomous and independent are more likely to improve in GPA if they participate in a low-authority, group-structured method of group counseling (8).

The second study, somewhat of a replication of the first, was conducted in 1968 with the following purpose:

> The purpose of the present investigation was to determine whether or not college male underachievers who participate in methods of group counseling that are congruent with their needs for dependence or independence would achieve a significantly higher GPA at the conclusion of the counseling period and 3 months later than male underachievers who experience incongruent methods of group counseling and a control group of underachievers who receive no group counseling at all (9, p. 507).

Gilbreath summarized his methods and results:

> 97 college male underachievers were divided into 4 high- and 4 low-dependent groups and given 6 1.5-2 hour sessions of either leader-structured (appropriate for dependent underachievers, inappropriate for independent underachievers) or group-structured (appropriate for independent underachievers, inappropriate for dependent underachievers) group counseling. A like group served as a control. The results showed that men who experienced appropriate methods of group counseling achieved significantly higher grades than men in the control group (significant at .05 level) and a significant increase in their number of passing (2.00) grades or above at the conclusion of counseling (significant at .01 level). There were no differences between groups 3 months following the experiment (9, p. 506).

"Student-To-Student Counseling for Academic Adjustment" (10)

Southwest Texas State College utilizes upperclassmen as student counselors to counsel groups of entering freshmen. In selecting the student academic counselors, a careful screening process is utilized. Such things as scholastic ability, study orientation, academic history, peer acceptance, leadership experience, and conversational effectiveness are among the variables that are systematically evaluated during the selective process. Once selected, the student counselors are given training through a 40-hour instructional program.

The group counseling for academic adjustment consists of three two-hour sessions: survival orientation, test interpretation, and study skills.

In 1960, the effectiveness of the college's program of academic adjustment guidance was evaluated through research supported by a grant from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. Test-retest results of the Effective Study Test and the Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes were used as the criteria for improvement in study behavior, and QPA and total quality points were used as the criteria for actual academic improvement. Brown summarizes the research as follows:

> Two samples of 216 students, each containing 108 males and 108 females were selected from the 670 full-time freshmen entering the Southwest Texas State College in fall of 1960. Students in the control (uncounseled) sample were individually matched with those in the experimental (counseled) sample on sex, high school quarter rank, high school size, scholastic ability, and study orientation. Experimental subjects were organized into 54 counselee groups, with the four freshmen in each group being carefully matched. Six upperclassmen, three males and three

> females, were randomly assigned as counselors to same sex counselee groups. The test-retest differential for counseled freshmen were significantly higher on measures of study behavior. Counseled freshmen earned grades averaging one-half letter grade and 8.3 quality points higher during the first semester (10, p. 811).

"Effects of Group Discussions on Underachievement and Self-Actualization" (11)

Recognizing that underachievers are those who do not accomplish what would be predicted from a measurement of their abilities and that self-actualized persons are those who are achieving their potential, the authors sought to discover if "group discussions result in greater gains than a lecture group in self-actualization for underachievers, as measured by the Personal Orientation Inventory (11, p. 283)."

Using the Personal Orientation Inventory, measurements of self-actualization were obtained for 28 underachieving college students. These students withdrew from their remedial study skills psychology classes and participated either in a discussion (N=14) or a lecture group (N=14).

Those in the discussion group were divided into three subgroups of four subjects in one group and five subjects in the other two groups. Each of these subgroups met with a group leader one hour a day, two days a week for a total of 18 group meetings. The group leader guided group discussions on topics such as motivation, the negative aspects of underachieving, the merits of self direction, study problems, etc. Those in the lecture group were presented the material usually covered in the remedial study skills psychology class. This material

was presented in an academic manner with an emphasis on lectures with specific questions and answers.

Both major groups registered significant increments in self-actualization and grade point averages. There were, however, no significant differences between the increases made by the discussion group and the increases made by the lecture group. The authors speculated that "the special attention awarded these underachievers fulfilled lower level needs and released them for self-actualization, as well as producing significant gains in grades (11, p. 282)."

"Group Counseling with College Underachievers" (12)

This study sought to assess the effects of group counseling on the college underachiever by contrasting a matched group of college underachievers receiving group counseling with a group receiving no counseling. Change in academic performance was the criterion by which the outcome was evaluated. A second purpose of the study was to relate the level of therapist accurate empathy (measured by Accurate Empathy Scale), non-possessive warmth (measured by Unconditional Positive Regard Scale), and therapist genuineness during group counseling (measured by Therapist Genuineness Scale) to the degree of improvement in the counseled students. Underachievement was identified by relating American College Test results to GPA.

Results were as follows:

> The 24 experimental students who received group counseling showed greater improvement in grade point average than 24 matched, non-counseled control subjects.

> Further, those counseled subjects who received the highest therapeutic conditions tended to show the greatest improvement (12, p. 243).

Broedel, Ohlsen, Proff, and Southard Study (4)

This study was reviewed in a secondary source; the primary source was not available. Perhaps the importance of this study concerns what the authors did not find. The following quotation from the Journal of Educational Research effectively summarizes the study:

> Broedel, Ohlsen, Proff, and Southard used multiple (group) counseling as a treatment method with underachieving adolescents. Their study illustrated well the difficulty that can ensue in treating academic underachievers. They applied an accepted therapeutic method to students with underachievement problems. The investigators apparently operated on the assumption that successful remediation would involve the modification of the antecedents of current behavior. They found significant changes in acceptance of self as well as increased acceptance of others by the gifted underachievers but they failed to produce evidence '. . . that group counseling improves underachievers' academic performance in school (4, p. 31).'

"A Comparison of Three Methods of Assisting Underachieving High School Students" (1)

Thirty-two underachievers were identified from a group of 299 high-school juniors. The subjects were divided into four groups of eight students which were matched on aptitude (sum of Differential Aptitude Test verbal and abstract reasoning subtests), achievement (GPA), underachievement (difference in percentile rank in aptitude and achievement), socio-economic status, age, and sex. One group received group counseling, one group received indivicual counseling, one group received a one-session motivational experience (perhaps this is the most traditional treatment), and one group received no counseling.

Three criteria were measured prior to and following the 12-week experimental period: a measure of personal adjustment (Hilden's Q-sort), a measure of study habits and attitudes (Brown*Holtzman Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes), and grades in four major courses. Correlations of individual Q-sorts with a criterion Q-sort based on sortings by 7 psychologists constituted the Q-sort adjustment score.

The authors concluded:

> Two-way analysis of variance indicated that the four groups did not differ significantly on any of the criteria. A comparison of the two counseled groups with the two non-counseled groups indicated that they differed significantly in Q-sort adjustment score change (attributed to the change in the individually counseled subjects), and in increase in grade point average (1, p. 88).

"Tutorial Group Therapy and Remedial Reading" (13)

This article concerns the use of tutorial group therapy as an aid in solving reading problems of emotionally disturbed deliquent adolescents. This method integrates remedial reading and psychotherapeutic techniques and is quoted because of the uniqueness of one of its core techniques—the creation and use of group story. The author states:

> In brief, a spontaneous story is invented by the entire group. The group decides on a topic and then each member takes his turn at providing a free association sentence until the group story incorporates the fantasies of all members and provides the therapist with a medium of operation. The implications of the story are often far reaching and the therapeutic task appears to be not only in bringing about the invention of the story and the production of fantasies but also in handling the material that grows out of the story. Once obtained the story is typed and used as material for reading and discussion (13, p. 29).

With this method the therapist is "primarily interested

in understanding that which prevented the individual from learning to read rather than teaching him to read (13, p. 29-30)."

"The Effects of Structured and Unstructured Group Counseling on Male College Students' Underachievement" (14)

This study was a comparison of the effects of counselor structured group counseling and group structured group counseling on certain outcomes of achievement for male college underachievers.

Underachievers were identified by a comparison of the College Qualification Test and GPA. Volunteer underachievers were divided into 12 groups. The groups were equal in ability and initial GPA. From these 12 groups four were randomly selected and designated as controls. The remaining eight groups were assigned randomly to two types of treatment: counselor structured and group structured. The difference in treatment of the two groups is indicated in the following statement:

> One experience placed emphasis on material structured specifically for the underlying dynamic dimensions of the male college underachiever's genesis of poor scholastic performance, and the other group counseling experience emphasized the discussion of material which originated within the group, but which may or may not have been concerned with the dynamic dimensions of the male college underachiever as reported in the literature (14, p. 389).

Counselor structured groups discussed topics such as academic underachievement, goals and purposes, dependence-independence, self-feelings, expression of anger and hostility, and impulses and controls. In each case the counselor presented each topic with a realistic example, and the group was encouraged to freely discuss their feelings and experiences as they related to the topic under discussion. The group

structured groups placed emphasis on material spontaneously originating within the group, and students focused on such topics as study habits and attitudes, feelings associated with poor performance, and some consideration of purposes and goals as they might relate to their underachievement. Control groups received no counseling.

Three criteria of evaluation were used: measures for achievement need (Stern Activities Index), measure of study habits and attitudes (Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes), and GPA. Pre-counseling, post-counseling, and a three month follow-up measure were examined.

Results indicated there were no significant differences between the students in the different groups for study habits and attitude scores nor for achievement need. GPA results were as follows:

> Results indicated that those subjects in the counselor structured groups had a significantly greater rate of change in GPA after counseling than the subjects in either the group structured or control groups. The group structured groups rate of change was greater than the controls after counseling. Three months following counseling the counselor structured groups rate of change was significantly greater than the controls, but not greater than the group structured groups. It was concluded that a counselor structured group experience can have both an immediate and a delayed, even if somewhat limited, effect on academic achievement with male college underachievers (14, p. 388).

"A Study of the Effects of Group Counseling on the Academic Performance and Mental Health of Underachieving Gifted Adolescents" (15)

Broedel compared multiple counseling with an absence of counseling using the following criteria: increases in school grades, increases in achievement test scores, increases

in acceptance of self, and reduction in incidence of stated problems.

The sample consisted of 29 gifted, underachieving high school freshmen divided at random into experimental and control groups. The experimental treatment consisted in having 16 multiple counseling sessions with the experimental group during an eight-week period and giving no counseling to control subjects. Initial measures were compared with measures made at the end of the experimental period for both groups and, for the experimental group, with follow-up data obtained one week later and 16 weeks later.

Significant differences between experimental and control subjects were found only on the criterion of increases in acceptance of self. Significant differences were found for experimental subjects on scores on achievement tests given immediately after counseling and on those given 16 weeks later.

"Group Counseling and the Academic Performance of Anxious College Freshmen" (6)

The authors sought to test the hypothesis that "the academic performance of anxious college freshmen who were likely to be underachievers could be facilitated through the early application of group counseling procedures (6, p. 195)."

Male college freshmen at Duke University with high anxiety scores on the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale were invited to participate in counseling groups designed as an academic orientation program. Volunteers were divided into an experimental-counseled group (N=26) and a non-counseled control group (N=27) which were matched on factors previously found to

relate to academic success (ACE scores; type high school attended; etc.). Students in the experimental group were divided into four counseling subgroups of six to eight students each. The number of counseling sessions with the four groups ranged from 8 to 11. During the sessions, students were encouraged to discuss problems of any sort about which they were concerned, and experienced counselors from the Duke University Bureau of Testing and Guidance served as facilitators. Students in the control group were given a cover story and told that they would be offered an opportunity to participate in the program during the second semester.

Using improvement in GPA from midsemester until the end of the semester as the criterion of the effects of counseling upon academic performance, it was found that the counseled students showed significantly greater improvement than the non-counseled students. Also, among the counseled students, a Pearson correlation of .63 was found between the number of sessions attended and the amount of GPA improvement. This indicates that to a degree the high attenders showed greater improvement than the low attenders. As to whether the greater improvement among high attenders was caused by the group counseling or by the personality of high attenders, the authors concluded:

> Therefore, it would seem reasonable to conclude that although personality characteristics of High Attenders may have accounted for their regular attendance at group counseling sessions, participation in group counseling provides the best explanation for the improvement in their grades (6, p. 203).

CONCLUSION

The author undertook this review of the literature in hopes that he would garner some knowledge which would be practically useful in using group work with underachieving junior college students. Of the studies reviewed, two seemed to offer ideas which could be of direct, functional benefit. The research done by Spielberger, Weitz, and Denny entitled "Group Counseling and the Academic Performance of Anxious College Freshmen" was unique in that it placed emphasis on the prevention of underachievement rather than its cure. If there is a correlation between high anxiety and academic underachievement, we should identify the anxious and work with them before the fact. Also, the research done by Brown entitled "Student-To-Student Counseling for academic Adjustment" seemed to represent a good approach. It would seem that upperclassmen trained in group work would perhaps be the best qualified academic counselors available. Both of these projects had quite impressive results.

However, it is the opinion of the author that taken in aggregate the research on group work with underachievers represents a fragmented, contradictory, incoherent hodgepodge of inconclusive data. In his article "The Researcher and the underachiever: Never the Twain Shall Meet" John Peterson indicates that the lack of uniformity in the identification of "underachievers" causes the confusion in related research. He suggests that more exacting criteria for selection of the population to be studied must be set in the following four areas:

universe to be sampled (age, sex, etc.); measure of aptitude (I.Q., past performance, etc.); measure of achievement (standardized tests, grades, etc.); and measure of discrepancy between aptitude and achievement which constitutes underachievement (16, p. 380). Peterson states:

> If the researcher and the underachiever are ever to meet, we must base our research on more solid ground. First, we need to examine the methods currently being used to identify underachievement and to gather data. Second, we need to ask whether underachievement can be understood at all apart from the individual who manifests the behavior. Facing these problems should be prerequisite to further research (16, p. 381).

The author feels that Mr. Peterson's opinion concerning research and underachievement is particularly applicable to group research and the underachiever:

> Educators and guidance workers continue to be facinated by the phenomenon of academic underachievement. As a result, research in this area proliferates. The term "underachiever," which is of relatively recent coinage, appears with predictable regularity in the contents of the journals. If students suddenly began to accomplish at a level precisely commensurate with ability, research would suffer a staggering blow.
>
> The published results pour forth—segmented, molecular, seeking the causal factor. But the anxious reader, hoping to assemble the findings into a coherent whole, encounters an overwhelming obstacle: the pieces don't fit together (16, p. 379).

While Mr. Peterson wrote this article in 1963 the research since this time would offer him little consolation.

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